

Off the Road

When did the travel bug become such a plague?

BY JAMES MORRIS

THE FIRST TRAVELERS LEFT HOME RELUCTANTLY, after playing fast and loose with the terms of their lease:

Some natural tears they dropped, but wiped them soon;
The World was all before them . . . :
They hand in hand with wand'ring steps and slow,
Through Eden took their solitary way.
(*Paradise Lost* XII, 645–46, 648–49)

Travel began as a precise landlord's retribution, and no matter how plush the circumstances of movement have become, lodged still in travel's DNA are the traces of a sweet deal gone sour: The big plane will shudder, the high-decked ship rock, the Segway reverse course. And physical shocks are the least of it. Our errant first parents had only each other to endure. But we move in the company of . . . others, and it costs us. The assorted penalties of contemporary travel are evidence of how long the Almighty can hold a grudge.

Adam and Eve had no choice but to be on their way. We elect to go, over and over. The figures from the Travel Industry Association of America are staggering. "Travel and tourism" is said to be a \$1.3 trillion industry in the United States. "Total domestic person trips," defined as trips that take you 50 miles

or more from home, or force you to spend at least a night away from home, totaled 1.2 million in 2004 (the number has no doubt gone up since), and more than 80 percent of them were not for business or professional purposes but for leisure travel. We can't wait to lock the front door and unsheathe the handle on that tippy piece of wheeled luggage.

Why do we go? Our motives are pretty much what the motives for elective travel have always been: to see the country, or the world; to know the unknown; to open ourselves to new experience; to relax; to confirm that, by golly, people the world over really are the same. An intrepid few of us may even insist, with Robert Louis Stevenson (*Travels With a Donkey*), "For my part, I travel not to go anywhere, but to go. I travel for travel's sake." Easy enough for him to say; the jackass he traveled with wasn't the garrulous stranger in an adjacent seat.

But what's left for the casual traveler to discover? Since that day when the world was all before our unsettled ancestors, a lot has happened. Adam and Eve may have traveled light, but they did carry curiosity from Eden, and it was the best part of their legacy. All the brave individuals, down through the ages, who said to themselves, "I know what's here, but what's elsewhere?" and then set out to answer the question, made us a gift of the world they observed.

The great heroic age of travel and exploration is

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And we're off!

ecome a familiar sight to bil—
—not because they've been
anywhere necessarily, but
any others have done the job
nd broadcast the results, in
images. It's not just the world's
architectural sites—the easy
amids, Parthenon, Pantheon,
and such—or natural won-
ce the Nile in flow, that we rec-
Thanks to nature TV, we're
about the world's rarest flora,
ractively on speaking terms
lot of its fauna. Haven't we
the pain of those hapless pen-
whose to-and-froing across
ctica for the species' survival
ardly preferable to their fall-
te as a sea lion's lunch? The
can profile an insect borne
; to oblivion on an indifferent
ird, or find the shyest mollusk
in an undersea recess. It won't
efore TV runs out of novel
ss evolution picks up the pace.
Isn't it important to see for
? Travel broadens us, right?"
stand does experience have
efore it counts as experience?
ve seen pictures of the pigeons
nice's Piazza San Marco, do
eed to have them hem you in
ite, while you confirm that the
by basilica and the bobbing
blas look . . . just like they do in
os? If travel is indeed broad-
e entirely contained. What's
o hear about somebody else's
ation slide shows, or maybe
ons, could break the steeliest
e Hague cry "Foul!"
ot when our impatience has
ed. It used to take supreme

courage to travel. Now it takes a lot of distracting devices (by generations: PlayStation, iPod, laptop, book). We suffer to the measure of our new intolerance, as when we're outraged by a couple hours' delay in crossing an ocean that was once an ordeal lasting weeks. Drive the family to a national park, and you can swap photos and sandwiches with the family in an adjacent SUV while your convoy moves, taillights to grills, through the clogged space at the speed of courage surfacing in Congress.

AT AIRPORTS, WE'RE PUT through a rite of passage that baffles everyone and fools no one. Stolid attendants eye every impatient toddler and unsteady grandma like an agile assassin.

Travel for pleasure? Not when at airports you're put through a rite of passage that baffles everyone and fools no one: the phased frisking of decent folk who are made to shed layers of clothing and their no-less-suspect books, newspapers, currency, and unguents before being herded, unshod, by stolid attendants through nervous portals, every impatient toddler and unsteady grandma eyed like an agile assassin.

Are things better aloft? Not when you can reach into the pocket of the seatback in front of you and pull out garbage that could be carbon dated. Cost cutting by the airlines leaves fewer pennies for cleaning crews, whose appearances are being coordinated with those of Halley's comet. Is the day far off when flight attendants will ask you to do a quick turn with a handvac to earn your microchip pretzels?

And yet we go. And go—on ships like skyscrapers laid sideways, each carrying the population of a small town and the frills of a big city; on planes that in a few years will cocoon many more hundreds than planes do at present, squeezing

us as usual, but stacking us too; on thrifty buses that promise to show us the country up close, and all too successfully do.

We've been sold on the idea that travel is no longer a luxury. It's a staple, like soymilk. Vacations used to be for summer. Now they know no season—or rather, they know every season. The travel industry hawks a product, and to get the attention of a public that, increasingly, has been there (on the Discovery Channel) or done that (on Court TV), the pitches have

become more extravagant. How many people actually take the kinds of trips featured in the glossy getaway magazines, or in the newspaper travel supplements that extend the fantasies the papers invite us to indulge other days of the week about real estate, fashion, and food: Find the house-on-stilts of

your dreams, and ignore the friable mountain it clings to; dress like the guy who always got beat up in school, or the girl who majored in escort service; follow a recipe that lets you substitute badger if your butcher is out of Tasmanian devil.

The travel pages tap into the same extremes of mad play, and with cost rarely an issue, the unreality is pure. Editors dream like drunken Coleridges, and hand subordinates maps. You don't just take a trip to Germany anymore; you book a Third Reich tour of Munich. You make for "the uttermost part of the Earth: Tierra del Fuego." You're the first on your block with a tan from the Saint-Tropez of Turkey, Turkbuku. You're off to an Ayurvedic spa in southern India, one of the "pilgrims with deep pockets" willing to bet that an ancient medical system can't be any worse than our own. A recent issue of *New York* magazine featured an exhausting number of ways to relax: Track a wild rhino in Africa. Spend a morning at a Tokyo gym—with sumos. Nightsled down a torch-lit mountain in Slovenia. Windsurf in a rum-scented Dominican Republic paradise. Reef dive with whale sharks in Honduras. Shop for national treasures at

bargain prices in Oaxaca. (Hmmm. Rhino or a shopping spree? For a New Yorker, not exactly Sophie's choice.)

You can't make this stuff up anymore. Or rather you can, but you'd better be quick, before a Sunday travel supplement staffer beats you to the departure gate, in search of the perfect sausage, or the planet's 10 best gated communities, or the world's most kid-friendly volcanoes. Every patch on Earth, no matter how distant, has its locating coordinates, which include an arrival time. In these fantasies, the world is spread before us as if it were a vast playground for Americans. But as playgrounds go, our world is, in fact, one of the old-fashioned kind, paved with concrete, where you can crack your skull if you lose your balance, and bullies lie in wait. The same newspapers and TV screens that promote the fantasies of travel put this rough world before us, too, and the allurements of the one contend with the dangers of the other. At the far end of the journeys abroad we Americans take these days, the arms that once opened to welcome us may be folded.

Can a case be made for staying put? It's open-and-shut for Pascal in his take-no-prisoners *Pensées*: "All the misfortunes of men come from one thing only: their not knowing how to remain at peace in a room at home." At least Samuel Beckett, in *Waiting for Godot*, manages to put his two tramps outdoors, on a road, where they have the same exchange at the end of each act:

Well? Shall we go?
Yes, let's go.
[They do not move.]

Though it stops just short, their passivity tilts toward despair. Better to incline another way and consider passivity's upside: Unnoticed, forgotten, you'll be safe. As Ulysses reminds Achilles in *Troilus and Cressida*, "Things in motion sooner catch the eye/than what stirs not" (III.iii.182-3). (Was it sly of Shakespeare to put those words in the mouth of the man who went on to become travel's poster boy, launching the tradition of a cruise with extended layovers?) Best of all would be to find passivity an unex-

pected stimulant. No one ever took more delight in being out and about than Cole Porter, but even he had to catch his breath from time to time and weigh the alternative:

Just being still
Might give us a brand new thrill.
So why don't we try staying home?
Wouldn't that be nice?
We've tried everything else twice.
So why don't we try staying home?
("Why Don't We Try Staying Home?" 1929)

I'm not proposing inertia as a permanent option; the economy couldn't take it. But as a temporary measure, a counter to the ceaseless spin of our lives, lasting just long enough for us to get our bearings and sort out a bit more of what's fantasy about the world from what's purposeful, it has its appeal. Stillness, silence, the reflective pause—air and head cleared of noise—are about as welcome today as plague rats were in the Middle Ages. The newest reaper wields no scythe, just puts a bone finger to his lips and pulls your earpiece.

What the Roman poet Horace wrote to a peripatetic friend a couple of millennia ago is sensible still:

Caelum non animum mutant qui trans mare currunt.
Strenua nos exercet inertia: navibus atque
quadrigis petimus bene vivere. Quod petis, hic est,
est Ulubris, animus si te non deficit aequus.
(*Epistles* I. 11. 27-30)

Which is to say, stretching the concise verse to a clumsy length (and keeping the Latin's shifts from third person to first to second), "People cross the sea and the sky above them is different, but they don't change. A busy idleness keeps us going. We take to ships and boats in search of the good life. But what you're after is right here in Ulubrae [i.e., at home], if you keep your mind on an even keel."

So strive for a settled soul, a level mind, right where you are, and put the brakes to the body for a while. How frail a vessel the body is anyway to bear the shifting cargo of our expectations. ■